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Brother says captured kin once worked on CIA airline

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By Alfonso Chardy
Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The American who was captured in Nicaragua when his plane was shot down by Sandinista troops on Sunday is a former Marine who once worked for a CIA-operated airline in Vietnam, his older brother said yesterday.

Eugene Hasenfus, 45, the only survivor among the four people on the downed cargo plane, was not currently working for the U.S. government, according to his brother, William Hasenfus of Oshkosh, Wis.

U.S. officials also denied yesterday that Eugene Hasenfus was connected with the U.S. government at the time of the crash.

William Hasenfus said his brother currently worked for a private air freight firm based in Florida and had no current ties with the CIA.

The other three men on board the plane were killed when the aircraft, loaded with munitions, was shot down Sunday over southern Nicaragua.

William Hasenfus said that he thought his brother survived by jumping to safety wearing the parachute he recently lent him.

Eugene Hasenfus, of Marinette, Wis., began working for the Florida air cargo firm last summer, after working in construction, his brother said yesterday.

During the height of the Vietnam War, Hasenfus flew on Air America aircraft in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, and was responsible for weighing and balancing equipment aboard the aircraft, according to his brother.

At the time, Air America was operated by the CIA and involved in clandestine air cargo operations in Southeast Asia. In the 1970s, the CIA divested itself from Air America, but those who monitor American intelligence community affairs say the spy agency and the company continue informal contacts.

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson denied yesterday that Eugene Hasenfus and the downed plane were connected to the CIA, according to the Associated Press. She also declined to comment on whether Hasenfus had worked for Air America.

The Sandinistas maintain that the downed aircraft was a supply plane for the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan contra rebels, originally organized by the CIA in 1981. They also said Hasenfus identified himself as a U.S. military adviser stationed in El Salvador.

The Sandinista reports shook Washington because the CIA and all other U.S. government agencies are barred from aiding the contras with military supplies, funds or advice. That prohibition will be lifted once Congress clears President Reagan's new package of $100 million in aid to the contras.

A contra spokesman in Washington, Javier Arguello, said the downed aircraft did not belong to the contras.

Two administration officials familiar with contra affairs, one of them linked to the U.S. intelligence community, said the mission of the aircraft in Nicaragua was purely private and that the men aboard had no immediate connection to the CIA or the administration.

However, the two officials conceded that the Americans "may have been" volunteers once connected to the CIA or the military services, part of a network of private American advisers to the contras that was organized in 1984 when Congress banned the CIA from directly assisting the contras for military activities.

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, told reporters that private relief flights had enabled the Nicaraguan resistance to survive in the face of the restrictions on U.S. government assistance.

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Since 1984, a number of anti-communist paramilitary organizations such as the Alabama-based Civilian Material Assistance have been providing funds, clothing and advisers to the contras. Some of the advisers were drawn from the ranks of retired CIA and Pentagon personnel.

In Marinette, Theresa Hasenfus, who said she was Eugene's stepmother, told the Associated Press that he and his wife, Sally, had three children and lived outside Marinette on the shore of Lake Michigan's Green Bay.

Sally Hasenfus is a real estate agent in Marinette, a city of about 12,000 on the Wisconsin border with Michigan's Upper Peninsula, she added.

William described his brother as about 6 feet tall with red hair and "a good old American build on him." He said Eugene was athletic in high school and still "liked to have a beer with the boys."

William said that he and Eugene once ran a parachuting school and both are ardent sky divers.

"It's a little ironic," he said. "That was my parachute on his back. He just happened to ask for it when he visited a few weeks ago and that's what saved him."

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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